Mnemosyne

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Cultural Constellations: Burckhardtsource.org

Emilie Oléron Evans (In conversation with Dr. Susanne Müller and Dr. Costanza Giannaccini)
Institute of Advanced Studies of the University of Strasbourg (USIAS), France
oleronevans@unistra.fr

Burckhardtsource.org hosts a corpus of over 1,000 documents forming the correspondence of more than 300 different authors with Swiss historian of art and culture Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897). Dr. Susanne Müller and Dr. Costanza Giannaccini, who collaborated on the creation of the platform and on the critical digital edition of the letters to Burckhardt, discuss the guiding principles of a project that acts as a generator of cultural constellations, and its resonance with Aby Warburg's concept of a dynamic *Denkraum*.

Introduction: The Cultural Historian, Subject and Interpreter of the Past

Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897) studied history with Leopold von Ranke and art history with Franz Kugler, and gave equal importance to both these subjects in his teaching at the University of Basel and in his writings, his most famous book being *Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (the English translation of which was published in 1878). A pioneer of cultural history, Burckhardt proposed that the emerging discipline should assume the role of studying all forms of expression of a given culture, granting a crucial role to the arts.

In his 1927–8 seminars at the University of Hamburg, Aby Warburg said that Burckhardt's acute *Weltbewusstsein* ('world-consciousness') made him (like Friedrich Nietzsche) a 'very sensitive seismograph' (Warburg, 1927: n. pag.). In the introduction to *Civilisation*, Burckhardt indeed acknowledged the influence of the historian's subjectivity in the interpretation of cultural and artistic sources:

> To each eye, perhaps, the outlines of a given civilisation present a different picture. [. . .] In the wide ocean upon which we venture, the possible ways and directions are many; and the same studies which have served for this work might easily, in other hands, not only receive a wholly different treatment and application, but lead also to essentially different conclusions. Such indeed is the importance of the subject, that it still calls for fresh investigation, and may be studied with advantage from the most varied points of view. (Burckhardt, 1878: 4)

Burckhardt's identification of a subjective presence in the study of the past, and of the necessary flexibility of cultural history, could be taken as a model for the approach of the role of digital humanities today, particularly when it comes to what the Swiss art historian considered to be 'the most serious difficulty of the history of civilisation': 'A great intellectual process must be broken up into single, and often into what seem arbitrary categories, in order to be in any way intelligible' (Burckhardt, 1878: 4). The breaking down and re-composition of 'categories' and clusters of knowledge envisaged by Burckhardt might have inspired Aby Warburg, who attempted in *Mnemosyne Atlas* to go further into the exploration of the part played by individual psychology in the constitution of a 'thought space' (*Denkraum*) prompted by image constellations.

Digitalising Burckhardt's Correspondence: A Database as Denkraum

Senior Research Fellow Dr. Susanne Müller and Post-doctoral Research Fellow Dr. Costanza Giannaccini have been working on the platform 'Burckhardtsource.org', a EUROCORR project coordinated by Prof. Maurizio Ghelardi at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa.[1] The platform will host about 1,000 letters (800 of which are currently available) sent to Jacob Burckhardt by more than 300 different authors. This database will complement the corpus of letters by Burckhardt already published (Burckhardt, 1949–1994), and make visible again the circulation of thoughts in this

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[1] The Burckhardt Source platform can be found at: http://burckhardtsource.org.

important correspondence, in which the foundations for a European culture were collectively discussed and constructed. In their dialogical movement, letters, even more so than other written sources, enable the acknowledgement of the subject's intercession in the telling of history, preventing it from becoming the form of traditional history writing, or 'the conventional presentation of a narrow series of fact', as Burckhardt put it; something he tried to avoid (Burckhardt, 1908: 21).

Emilie Oléron Evans (EOE): *The access to Jacob Burckhardt's correspondence provided by* Burckhardt Source *sets out to be 'the opposite of a "monolithic" and fixed edition' (Di Donato and Müller, 2014: 332). What then are the main ambitions of a 'dynamic' edition from the point of view of pedagogy and research?*

Susanne Müller/Costanza Giannaccini (SM/CG): 'The idea was originally to create a hybrid edition of the letters written to Jacob Burckhardt. However, obstacles occurring at various stages of the project modified its course:

1. Traditionally, the philological apparatus of a critical edition has a more rigid structure, compared to a multi-layered digital edition. The latter allows for more transparency on the editorial decision-making, which the reader has the possibility to visualise (on the transcription level as well as on the level of the constitution of the text). Access to a copy of the manuscripts makes the genesis and the interpretation of the text more intelligible.
2. This previous point also has implications on visualisation. In a traditional edition, the link to the original format can remain very strong, and the curator chooses how the content will be visualised, whereas on a digital platform the users can choose which mode of visualisation best fits their needs.
3. This also applies to referencing. While traditional editions, on the one hand, rely on series of notes (footnotes, endnotes, appendix) that are dif-

ferentiated from the main body of text and from one another, a digital edition can provide semantic annotations and external links simultaneously. Through advanced research functions, the edition becomes "dynamic". No paper edition could offer such immediate and deep investigation into the texts.

4. Finally, any addition or correction that needs to be made to traditional paper editions renders a new publication necessary, whereas the platform content is constantly updated, supplemented and improved on. This is why we had to concede that a hybrid edition would have meant more than a simple parallel work, but would have been two projects in their own right, with different *modus operandi* and criteria'.

'It thus becomes clearer why we finally opted for an edition that was absolutely "fluid": the possibilities for teaching and research are almost unlimited. Burckhardtsource.org presents itself as stratified information: it does not remain chained to its point of origin, yet is still inscribed in an overall framing structure, where each piece of data can be identified as unique. In particular, semantic annotations provided by experts on our research group form a large worldwide library (what you could call a *Denkraum*), where knowledge constantly multiplies. While being a container, the database is open in both directions and can therefore be enriched with new information'.

'Finally, from the point of view of teaching, the fluidity of this edition enables a new approach, in as much as it provides as many types of content as there are ways of using them. This provides an opportunity for getting to grips more individually both with the substance and with the elaboration of knowledge. As an example, the *facsimile* published simultaneously can be used as material for palaeography exercises, but also as a document to explore the side-lines of the cultural history of the *Europe of Letters*'.

EOE: *The database is divided into categories or 'collections', forming many entry modes into the mind-set of Burckhardt's constellations of correspondents. What was the selection process behind these thematic clusters?*

SM/CG: 'The themes for the collections (**Fig. 1**) were the result of a flexible debate within the research group. By their very nature, letters are a unique type of document among all written production; they often serve as mediators for subjects that would otherwise be less represented in the main corpus. There has been extended research on Burckhardt as an erudite, i.e. as the author of considerable scholarship, and as a student of Italian art with an independent perspective; the specificity of letters is that they illustrate both these well-known aspects of his work and further topics that are just as important. We therefore selected recurring themes (recurring either in the text or in the metadata) that showed the depth and richness of on-going debates, and more accurately revealed Burckhardt's personality, beyond the usual topics most often discussed by biographers and historiographers'.

· 'The first set (*Potnia*) may have been the hardest to define in terms of point of view. Many scholars have looked for, and even taken it upon themselves to find, information and anecdotes that could explain Burckhardt's personal life, often with an insistence on an alleged morbid side to his character. The purpose of this collection was to make visible the broader context of the feminine condition in the 19th century, and of its confrontation with a masculine counterpart. In the dialogue between the sexes, although some deductions can be made on Burckhardt's intimate life, his sense of discretion is what seems to prevail.
· The *Bode* collection created itself, so to speak. Burckhardt's intellectual relationship to art historian [Wilhelm von] Bode was very idiosyncratic, and letters from other authors also revolved around it. This corpus is different from all the others because it is composed of the letters to and from Burckhardt and forms the first ever complete publication of the correspondence between the two art historians.
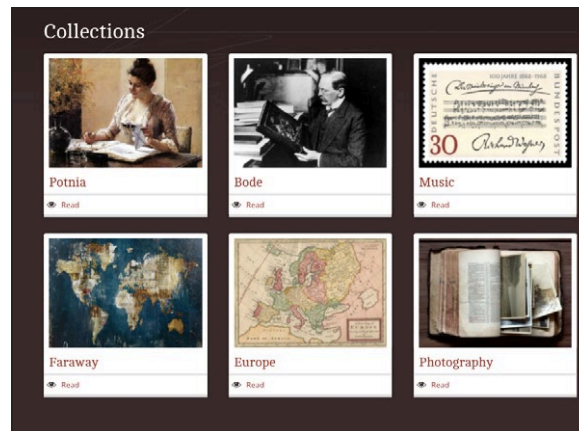
Figure 1: The collections on the platform's homepage, burckhardtsource.org, courtesy of Prof. Maurizio Ghelardi.

- *Music* was a great passion for Burckhardt and the subject of numerous letters that mirror the musical trends and taste of the time, often to an extreme (for instance, many correspondents expressed harsh criticism of Wagnerism). This collection also documents the social history of music through the mention of popular artists and of opera performances.
- Under the title *Faraway* are sorted letters that reveal the intricacy of the connections between Burckhardt and the rest of the world, in a network that spanned a surprisingly wide area given the reduced means of communication, compared to modern times.
- The collection about *Europe* came about owing to an urge to put together the wealth of information on historical events of the period. Manuscript letters are particularly important in that they represent a singular perspective on a key moment in the history and culture of Europe in the second half of the 19th century. Political conflicts involving France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland are tackled in these letters, sometimes in the form of travelogues or war journals, which confers to them a unique cultural resonance.
- The birth and first use of a new tool involved in both the creation and reception of art is the subject of the collection *Photography*. Burckhardt's response

to the new medium is particularly interesting, and through this correspond-
ence one is able to reconstruct the debates that form the background of the
large collection of photographs that he collected throughout his life'.

The Letters and their Images

*EOE: The prominent place of the topic of photography in the correspondence echoes the
importance of the emerging medium at the time. Will the platform connect with Burck-
hardt's own photographic collection, and if so, how?*

SM/CG: 'Photographs originally had a practical use in artistic and technical fields.
In particular, Burckhardt used them in his teaching as an aid to memory and as a
document to settle matters of attribution. The interaction between letters and pho-
tographs is indicated in the platform through semantic annotations: wherever possi-
ble, there is a link to the manuscript section in the University Library in Basel,[2] which
enables direct access to the original photographs mentioned in the relevant letter.
Unfortunately, some photographs have been lost in heritage settlements, though we
tried to fill in all conceivable gaps. As for those photographs that were sent to Burck-
hardt alongside letters, they have been scanned and stored in the metadata, and are
directly accessible on the platform'.

*EOE: The platform offers the possibility of accessing facsimiles of the transcribed letters.
What can this option bring to a reflection on materiality and on the visual?*

SM/CG: 'In letters, even more than in any other type of editorial project, the mate-
riality of the text plays an important part. The decision to present images of the
manuscripts was dictated by a double objective: firstly, our objective was to restore
the document's materiality as it appears in real life, by making apparent the tangible
particularities that only a scholar physically visiting an archive would otherwise have

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[2] Jacob Burckhardt's photographic collection can be found at the University of Basel's Library:
http://www.ub.unibas.ch/ub-hauptbibliothek/wir-ueber-uns/weiteres/jacob-burckhardt-edition/
abbildungssammlung (Last accessed 31 January 2017).

access to. This incidentally has a positive impact on manuscript conservation, since the originals are preserved as *facsimile*'.

'While direct access to the archive can be difficult, the scanned documents bring the archive to its users in the same conditions: paper quality, format, etc. What particularly matters is the typography and the preservation of the handwriting, in its symbolic significance in the relationship from author to recipient. In a printed edition, the publisher decides on the font, the formatting of the text and the corrections: there is always, therefore, a level of interpretation, which has been removed in Burckhardtsource.org by an immediate access to the source document'.

'Our second objective was to permit a deeper analysis of the data. High quality scans and a magnifying tool allow for an acute observation of all the graphic characteristics. Beyond the precise philological transcription of the text, this tool is useful for scholars interested in material culture and in the letter as an object'.

EOE: The database works like a palimpsest, layering words and images at all levels. Similarly, Burckhardt's work on cultural history hinges on art history. What relationship exists in his correspondence between the written and the visual?

SM/CG: 'Burckhardt's correspondence shows that he was mostly perceived as an art historian, as the author of *Cicerone. Eine Anleitung zum Genuss der Kunstwerke Italiens* (1855; the English translation, *The Cicerone: An Art Guide to Painting in Italy for the Use of Travellers and Students*, was published in 1908). This book offered to help readers to develop their own *Anschauung*, what Goethe defined as an intuition of reality. Burckhardt tried to provide basic elements for the refinement of gaze and taste. In the letters, although the subject is omnipresent, works of art are also represented in words; there are relatively few drawings and few photographs. Art is tackled mainly from an historical point of view'.

The Image of Art History

Hailed as the specialist, even the discoverer, of the culture of the 'Renaissance', Burckhardt described it as 'a transition from life to art' – a phrase quoted by Warburg (1932: 37); and in *Civilisation*, he compared the State to a work of art. Similar intimate connections between life and art can be found in the correspondence between Burckhardt and his intellectual circles, in the sense that art is understood as 'a complement to life, a second nature'. According to Müller and Giannaccini, this conception is recurrent in the letters that both art historians and artists wrote to Burckhardt. A plastic ability is what distinguishes man from animals, and it is in that sense that must be understood the phrase of the State as a work of art (a quotation that Burckhardt attributes to the classicist August Boeck).

EOE: Burckhardt's correspondents form a European network, within which emerged in particular the community of intellectuals who took part in the foundation of art history as a discipline. How does this community talk about art history in the letters, outside the confines of the stylistic boundaries of academic writing?

SM/CG: 'The typology of correspondents encompasses colleagues, former students and people formerly unknown to Burckhardt, who contacted him on the basis of his reputation. These three categories are at the core of the conversations on art that animate the correspondence, the tone of which varies in style and theme (**Fig. 2**). Burckhardt's colleagues tackled contemporary subjects, and from this point of view conversations with Bode are particularly revealing, such as discussions on matters of attribution, or around the foundation of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum in Berlin, [which would become the Bode-Museum]'.

'The long letters from Johann Matthias Commeter [art patron and connoisseur] on his travels, and his more or less benevolent suggestions for corrections to Burckhardt's *Cicerone*, are also enlightening. With only a very few other correspondents was the tone so reminiscent of a discussion "among peers". These letters are both a moment of sincere exchange of ideas, but also a compendium of Commeter's minute study of art; it is not

surprising that, among all the artworks mentioned in the available correspondence, the majority of works that proved difficult to identify are concentrated in Commeter's letters'.

'A few letters on artistic questions are left unanswered, and in some cases, Burckhardt even admitted to doing so deliberately, which leads to interesting conjectures on the reasons for his silence. In general, even if the tone of the letters is characterised by their relative freedom of expression, as is the case with the ones written by Gustav Stehelin [a textile merchant and close friend], they remain rather formal and the seriousness of the debate is never in question'.

EOE: What research tracks does the project hope to open, both in the domain of art historiography and in the range of possibilities that the use of digital media could open for the discipline of art history?

SM/CG: 'The original idea, as presented at the beginning of this conversation, was to create a hybrid edition. However, we retraced our steps and insisted on the new tools available that could best fulfil our goals, i.e. "libraries", Linked Data Providers, tools created for museums and collections (the *Bildarchiv* in Marburg is a collaborator on this project), and the elaboration of a customised vocabulary. We strove to main-
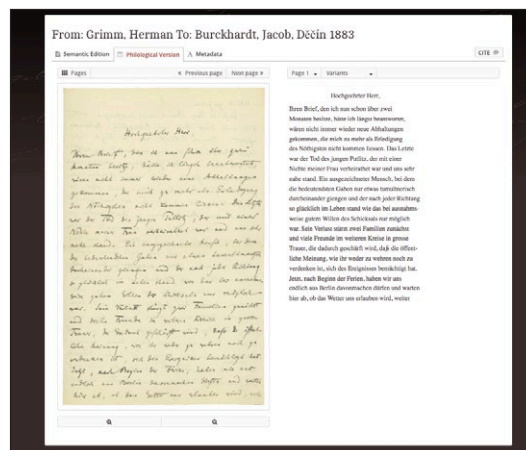

Figure 2: Example of a letter in its philological version (Herman Grimm to Jacob Burckhardt, 1883), Burckhardt Source, burckhardtsource.org/letter/9?philological, courtesy of Prof. Maurizio Ghelardi.

tain a tradition of scholarship within this innovative framework, by maintaining the basic principles of a critical edition in the classic sense, while also taking advantage of the benefits of technology. Thus, innovation is not the end goal but the starting point of the potential developments in the field. All the supplementary information, i.e. annotations, metadata, imported data, etc. can be received, downloaded and displayed in multiple ways'.

'The elaboration of texts and their connection with the Internet both contribute to a deeper and broader level of interpretation, since an unlimited amount of possible interconnections and extensions may be created. This development may be observed in all the platforms and databases created over the last few years, and all the digital libraries and projects aiming to gather and preserve archives'.

Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

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